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USSR's Slave-Made Products Must Be Banned

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Why is the United States a trading partner with a country that enslaves its people to make its goods? Despite clear American laws to the contrary, the government remains unwilling to confront this economic and human tyranny.

Our country champions liberty and human rights and has been the beacon for oppressed people for over two centuries. But the Administration will not enforce a 55-year-old law which states:

"All goods, wares, articles and merchandise mined, produced or manufactured wholly or in part in any foreign country by convict labor or/and forced labor... shall not be entitled to entry at any of the ports of the United States, and the importation thereof is hereby prohibited."

The nation in question is not South Africa, despite the overwhelming public attention on that country's human rights abuses. No, the nation referred to has resorted to much worse abuses—the use of forced labor in the production of goods. That nation is the Soviet Union.

The sheer brutality experienced by the estimated four million prisoners—10,000 of whom are jailed for purely political reasons—in 1,000-plus Soviet forced labor camps, has been well-documented in the State Department's 1984 report on human rights practices. Strenuous physical labor, semi-starvation diets, brutal beatings, and deprival of the most basic of human rights have become the hallmark of these camps that produce Soviet export goods.

The use of forced labor is so prolific that Cronid Lubarsky, Soviet astronomer and former prisoner, said, "In one degree or another, the hand of a prisoner has touched everything that the West receives from the Soviet Union."

Are these abuses just being discovered to the horror of government officials? Absolutely not.

The Senate requested a report from the State Department three years ago on forced labor in the Soviet Union. The preliminary report stated, "There is clear evidence the Soviet Union is using forced labor on a massive scale." And the final report found that forced labor is used to "produce large amounts of primary and manufactured goods for domestic and Western export markets."

In May 1983, the CIA compiled a list of over three dozen products made by Soviet forced labor, including chemicals, petroleum products, aluminum, electronics, auto parts, clothing, tea, wood products and glassware.

The regulations enforcing a ban against these imports are clear. If the commissioner of the U.S. Customs Service finds that information reasonably indicates that suspect products are imported, then those products will be withheld from entry. However, the Department of the Treasury has not allowed this to happen. It has prohibited the Customs Service from carrying out the regulations, thus prohibiting enforcement of the law.

Repeated efforts by Congress to force the Treasury Department to enforce the law have been ignored. Both the House and Senate have passed resolutions, held hearings and sent letters, all of which have been ignored.

The Treasury Department says that "available evidence provides no reasonable basis to establish a nexus between Soviet forced labor practices and specific imports from the Soviet Union." The CIA states that "despite continued monitoring, we are unable to obtain sufficient facts to make a solid case."

These lame excuses for not enforcing the law do not stand up under a legal test, much less under moral evaluation.

The Treasury Department does not need to determine that specific imported products are produced by forced labor. Customs Service regulations state that any merchandise which is "reasonably but not conclusively" suspected will be withheld from entry.

The burden of proof rests with the importer, not with the United States government. What could be more clear?

Even if proof were needed, one only need examine a 1983 CIA report identifying three dozen Soviet industries using forced labor. Or the 1983 report from Customs Service Commissioner William von Raab substantiating these reports of forced labor. Or a further Customs Service report identifying five classes of goods made with forced labor—gold ores, agricultural machines, tractor generators, refined oil products, and tea. Many national publications have documented specific goods made with forced labor. And finally, former prisoners themselves have testified about products they helped make while incarcerated in these forced labor camps.

What more does the government want? Why is there such a reluctance to confront this issue when substantial evidence exists and the law is very clear?

Enforcing this law will not be setting a precedent. In fact, in 1950, 15 congressmen filed a petition based on information from the CIA that the Soviet Union was producing crabmeat made by Japanese prisoners of war. The Customs Service banned the importation of crabmeat from the Soviet Union from 1950 to 1961. Presently, the Customs Service bans the importation of certain Mexican furniture and other items because of the use of forced labor in their production.

The regulations exist; the precedents exist for enforcing the ban against Soviet forced labor. Congress has expressed its concern about the importation of goods made with forced labor strongly and repeatedly. It is now up to the Administration to stand up for the principles of human freedom or continue to be a silent partner in Soviet brutality.

Why the long delay? ■